

Buzzard 1954

Title

Buzzard Survey 1954

Description and Summary of Results

Until the early 19th Century the Buzzard *Buteo buteo* was a common, widely distributed species in Britain, and apparently only absent from Shetland, Orkney, Outer Hebrides, Isle of Man and the London area. By 1914-1918 it had become extinct in Ireland, eastern Scotland, and all of England except the hill regions of the southwest and northwest. By 1954 it had recolonised Northern Ireland, much of southern England, the Midlands and parts of central Scotland, and it had colonised the Outer Hebrides for the first time.

In the late summer of 1953 myxomatosis spread from the European mainland to the British Isles, and it was thought that the Buzzard was likely to be indirectly affected by the disease, because it was known to feed extensively on rabbits. Hence it seemed a good time for a special study of the species.

The aim of the 1954 survey was to record the Buzzard's status before it could be seriously affected by myxomatosis. 810 pairs were estimated as breeding in the 115 sample census areas which covered 5857 sq miles (15171 sq km), and notes of the species's status were received from every county in Britain. From these figures it was estimated that the total Buzzard population of the British Isles in the early spring of 1954 was not less than 20000 birds and not more than 30000.

The highest population density recorded was 6.2 pairs per sq mile (on Skomer Island, Pembrokeshire), and in only four other census areas did it exceed 2 pairs per sq mile (Monmouthshire, two areas in Devon, and Iona (Argyll)). A usual density of 1-2 pairs per sq mile was often recorded in western Britain. They were most numerous in SW England, S and C Wales, and on the coast and islands of western Scotland. It was also found to have increased along the edge of the range and that the distribution in northern England and in Scotland was very patchy. Higher densities occurred on agricultural land and in mixed agricultural and moorland districts than in moorland and forests, and it was noted regularly on the edges of large towns.

Populations appeared to be limited by different factors in different parts of the range. In the east of Britain there was little doubt that the most important factor was game preservation – wherever it was high there were few Buzzards -- and the main increases occurred during the two World Wars when little game preservation was practised. In some moorland districts lack of breeding sites, in others lack of food and in places where available food and building sites exceeded demand, the territorial behaviour of the species could all be contributors.

A limited sample survey in 1955, specifically to areas where breeding data were collected in 1954, found a great decrease in breeding activity in all regions where rabbits had become rare or extinct, but normal in local areas where the rabbit population was not affected, and where rabbits had never been abundant. In 1956 a fuller census was repeated and, although coverage was quite good much less breeding was found than in 1954 but about twice as much as in 1955.

Methods of Data Capture

Observers were asked to count all Buzzards found in a defined census area. The areas were defined by the observer using clear boundaries (county boundaries, roads, rivers etc). A questionnaire was issued which asked for the numbers of birds found, how many were proved to breed, and to note the previous history of the species in the area if known. The second part asked more specifically about breeding records, and the third for any notes on feeding habits or to collect food pellets.

Purpose of Data Capture

The aims of the survey were: to map the breeding distribution of the species in 1954 based on the census counts; to document the history of the species as a breeding bird before 1954 and the outbreak of myxomatosis; to determine its ecological status in Britain and the causes of population changes during the last 150 years; and to obtain as much information as possible about its feeding habits.

Geographic Coverage

All of Britain and Northern Ireland.

Temporal Coverage

The breeding seasons of 1954 and 1956; and there was very limited survey work done in 1955 specifically in areas where breeding data had been collected in 1954.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organized and run by Norman Moore as a Trust-aided investigation. The Nature Conservancy gave generous support to the survey by allowing the organiser to spend part of his working time on it and by giving much secretarial help.

Organiser(s)

Norman W Moore

Current Staff Contact

archives@bto.org

Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Moore, N.W. 1957. The past and present status of the Buzzard in the British Isles. *British Birds* 50: 173-197.

A summary of this paper was given in *Bird Study*:

Moore, N.W. 1957. Buzzard survey. *Bird Study* 4: 107-108.

A second report covering survey work in 1956 was promised but never produced.

The survey was noticed in *Bird Study* issues for March, June and December 1954 (vol.1), all four issues for 1955 (vol.2) and 1956 (vol.3).

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

8 boxes containing all data and letters. They have not been scanned.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis